



Making a killing

Half Moon Theatre slays the audience with a recently resurrected farce by Mark Twain.

'Is He Dead?'

By Mark Twain

Adapted by David Ives

Directed by Paul Kassel

Half Moon Theatre Company

Through Nov. 26

Nov. 17-19, 25-26, 8 p.m.

Nov. 20 & 26, 2 p.m.

Cunneen-Hackett Arts Center, 12 Vassar St., Poughkeepsie

Tickets for evening shows: \$25 general,

\$22 seniors/students; matinees: \$20

general, \$18 seniors/students

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halfmoontheatre.org

It seems like a joke we must have heard somewhere or other: "An American, a German and an Irishman walk into a French painter's studio and the American says to the German..." You might fill in the rest or, if you prefer, take in "Is He Dead?" at Cunneen-Hackett to find the punch line. Actually, we are ahead of ourselves here. Save the thought. We'll come back to it.

Poughkeepsie's resident professional theatre troupe, Half Moon Theatre, opened their fifth season with the up-until-recently mostly forgotten Mark Twain comedy, "Is He Dead?" A good indicator of the success our friends at Half Moon have created in their first four years is easily noted in the fact that "Is He Dead?" opened to an SRO crowd. The management actually had to resort to bringing in more folding chairs. That's impressive and a success well deserved.

Twain wrote the original script in Vienna in 1898. It was first published in 2003 after an inordinate number of years gathering dust in the Twain Archives. "Is He Dead?" made its Broadway debut in December 2007, starring Norbert Leo Butz. Even though it garnered a Tony nomination for one of the actors, it only ran for three months. The script is a fairly predictable farce, not terribly sophisticated, but often deliriously funny.

"Is He Dead?" offers nearly every bit of comedic shtick one can imagine. The premise is that a brilliant French painter, Jean-Francois Millet (yes, Twain stole the name from a real painter), can't manage to sell or even give away his paintings and is thus starving. He has three buddies/art students, the American, the German and the Irishman referenced above. They convince Millet that the only way to make any money as an artist is to be dead. The downside to this strategy would seem to be that enjoying the money becomes problematic. The American, one Agamemnon Buckner, known as "Chicago," convinces Millet that he can fake his death, sell the paintings for a gazillion dollars (or francs) and supervise the whole thing by masquerading as his

own currently nonexistent twin sister. Sure, why not?

From this crackpot scheme flows all the rest of the insanity. Millet dressed as a woman has to console his own grieving girlfriend, while men begin lining up to take a romantic interest in him. Beyond that, now deceased, he is becoming the most important and valuable painter in all of France. The complications pile upon one another for the entire show until it seems the cops have gotten wise to ... well to something, and want to question the sister in the death of the brother; who, we know, isn't actually dead but is playing at being the sister—or something like that.

The cast are obviously having a grand time running back and forth on and off the stage, slamming doors, fainting, making vaguely suggestive comments and seeing how many classical comic bits they can squeeze into two hours of zaniness.

The result might be likened to "Mark Twain meets Monty Python and the Marx Brothers," all of whom may have had a bit too much caffeine or sugar.

The cast do a fine job.

Geoff Tarson plays the roles of Millet and of his "sister" with gusto. His comedic timing is well tuned and his sense of simple silliness is transcending.

Ryan Katzer plays the American, "Chicago." He and George Conrad, playing the German, "Dutchy," set the tone from the moment the show begins as they come on stage dancing and singing "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight" much as one might remember it from "It's a Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart. We get the same flavor of collegiate hijinks and bonhomie with maybe the hint of a glass or two of earlier consumed cheap French wine.

Michael Frohnhoefer plays the Irishman, Phelim O'Shaughnessy, who fills out the trio of Millet's pals. Having starred with Conrad a few years ago in "Greater Tuna," Frohnhoefer is no stranger to high energy, if slightly sophomoric, humor and manages to pull it off with gusto.

The rest of the cast are up to the same standard. Timing, physical humor, double entendres and one-liners are delivered impeccably.

What of the basic idea that an artist is often worth more dead than alive? It's a bit of a stretch, no doubt. On the other hand, the Associated Press (AP) reported just a couple of days ago that: "For the second year in a row, Michael Jackson has topped Forbes magazine's list of top-earning dead celebrities. The King of Pop, who died unexpectedly at age 50 in June 2009, earned an estimated \$170 million over the past year, making him the second-highest-earning pop star this year (behind U2)—dead or alive."

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même



Geoff Tarson as Jean Francois Millet (disguised as his twin sister, the widow Daisy Tillou) is wooed by the villain Bastien Andre, played by Darrell James. Photo courtesy Jen Kiaba Photography

chose." Who'd a thunk it?

There we have it: an evening of classical silly farce touching on as many old comic bits as one can cram into a couple of hours and having little or no redeeming social merit. Unless, of course, a good laugh and an audience walking out happy, smiling and giggling could be viewed as some sort of

social merit. You know, it just might be.

Jim Donick is an award-winning automotive writer who dabbles from time to time in other topics, including theater and travel. He is the editor of Vintage Sports Car magazine and contributes to a number of publications.



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